

X-Sender: pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu
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Date: Fri, 9 Apr 1999 18:47:24 -0700
To: Cozzarelli <ncozzare@socrates.berkeley.edu>
From: "Patrick O. Brown" <pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu>
Subject: Re: Unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam ejournal
Cc: Harold_Varmus@nih.gov, lipman@ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

Dear Nick and Harold,

I hope we can agree that, in principle, NIH exists to serve the public good by supporting biomedical research. If so, then NIH absolutely should be in the business of developing and offering (not imposing) new ways to improve communication in biomedical science. If this has the consequence of putting journals out of business, it will be because the journals couldn't meet the challenge, by serving their constituency as well as the NIH eprint system.

Nick, I couldn't agree more that it is good that journals compete with each other. The eprint system will join it this healthy competition. The question is: Can the journals rise to the challenge? If it turns out that something that NIH offers as a mechanism for publication is so much better than the current system that the journals cannot persuade scientists to publish in them or pay for them or read them, then I think that is a problem the journals will need to address by doing a better job, not something NIH should apologize for. I don't think many scientists (other than those with special loyalties to specific journals) would agree with the notion that NIH should forgo offering an alternative publication mechanism for fear that it might serve them too well. The argument that NIH shouldn't be using its resources to subsidize a competitor to the journals is a dangerous one to make, since NIH is directly or indirectly subsidizing most of the biomedical journals now. Perhaps we should stipulate that no more than 5% of what NIH currently spends on publication and subscription costs should be devoted to the eprint system. My guess is that this 5% would be many tens of millions of dollars.

I completely agree that it would be good for NIH to state that it is not the goal of the eprint system to replace all journals with a government monopoly. The ideal outcome would be that the private sector or the non-profit societies come up with something so much better than the eprint system that it tops anything NIH could do. Short of that it would be great if there were at least serious competition. I agree with Nick entirely that we do not want to have a single monolithic journal replace all the diversity of standards, points of view, format, etc. of the current journals. If I thought there was any chance of that I would be the first to try to stop it from happening.

But when I say that I want to put all other journals (as they currently exist) out of business, what I mean is that I (and I think the vast majority of scientists) want to get rid of a system that forces an expensive and arbitrary compartmentalization of the information, and obstructs the primary publication process by interposing an arcane, slow

and often capricious editorial process between the authors' initial submission of a report and its publication. What the eprint system can provide is a mechanism that allows the primary publication to proceed immediately and directly, and yet facilitates critical feedback and commentary and the stratification and categorization of work published in this way. The same arcane, slow and often capricious editorial process (or perhaps a better one) can then still be applied by any established or self-appointed editorial board, not for the virtually valueless purpose of controlling the primary publication decision, but for the one useful purpose that Nick and all of us recognize, which is to apply each editorial entity's idiosyncratic standards and styles to reviewing, sorting, and applying critical commentary to the work.

The intellectual free market will protect us against homogenization. Imagine the worst case scenario in which all papers were published through the NIH eprint server, which then did a really terrible, or even just suboptimal or excessively uniform job of handling the peer review/editing process. There is absolutely no doubt that, given the freedom to redistribute and republish the work at the eprint site, all sorts of commercial and non-commercial mechanisms would evolve to fill the niche by providing a better way of sorting and presenting the published work.

Your devoted disciple,

Pat